

How to lubricate the machine

Dr Anthony Grant is a pioneer in the field of coaching psychology; he talks to a suddenly twitchy **Caroline Baum**

When you are about to interview a psychologist, you suddenly become aware that every behavioural trait could be a significant clue. Or perhaps not.

A pair of giant dilated pupils watches over Dr Anthony Grant. He bought the two abstract images from Ikea and jokingly interprets them as the eyes of an Invisible Big Brother. They loom over the visitor amid the usual jumble of books and papers typical of someone struggling to keep up with their topic and general admin without the benefit of an assistant. Staring as if in mid-psychotic episode, (we are in the psychology department, after all) the eyes are not nearly as distracting as a large mountain range of Toblerone, which sits on a bookshelf daring Dr Grant to resist it. Clearly, whatever else he is, Grant is not a serious or credible chocoholic or he would have succumbed long ago, unless this is some aversion therapy experiment.

One thing is immediately apparent: Dr Grant is a very busy man. An appointment to meet has to be booked a month in advance and during our time together, there are several interruptions from students and colleagues. As the founder of the world's first university unit devoted to the field of coaching psychology, Grant is something of a pioneer and advocate for a much misunderstood and sometimes maligned field of research and practice. The era of self-help has spawned a multitude of people without any qualifications who call themselves coaches. Grant, who consults with senior executives and large companies, believes that his course, which is only available at postgraduate level, provides the legitimacy and credibility clients require. "In the

20 years since this field emerged from the US, some of the cowboys have mercifully disappeared," he says. "But it's still an unregulated profession, like selling diet pills."

At first glance, Grant might seem an unlikely candidate for an academic position, having left school in the UK at 15 to take up carpentry as a profession after a stint as a street sweeper. But with parents who were followers of the mystical teacher Alexander Gurdjieff, perhaps Grant's professional destiny is not quite so surprising after all. After running his own business as a contractor, he made the transition to a career in sales and marketing before beginning tertiary studies as a mature age student. He came to Australia 20 years ago because his dad suggested it to him; and the University Medal certificate he was awarded in 1997 is proudly displayed on the wall of his office in the Psychology Department.

Currently, between 50 and 80 students take Dr Grant's course every year. "The intake is capped, but interest is growing," says Grant, who teaches four days a week and consults one day a week. "This year 60 per cent of students are female; that is generally the case when we have a lot of students who come from the human resources sector. We also attract a lot of mid-career professionals who do the course to leverage their specific expertise in the finance or legal sectors. And of course it spills into personal growth stuff, which is what I think studying at university should be about anyway, if you are adhering to the classical Greek idea of an education." The unit offers a Master of Applied Science (Psychology of Coaching) and a Master of Organisation Coaching

(offered jointly with the faculty of Economics and Business).

Using a primarily cognitive behavioural methodology, Grant's approach is eclectic, drawing on a multitude of sources for his material including case studies from his own consulting work. "You really can't teach this stuff unless you are practicing it yourself. Coaching is not about theory; it's about wrestling with the frustrations of a meaningful life and how to grapple with change. The misleading thing is that not everyone is keen on change, even if they show up, so you have to understand how to assess their level of engagement and their willingness to try new patterns and approaches to solving problems."

Some of the early principles of coaching have been discredited by more recent research.

"We now know it is not always useful to debrief after traumatic episodes," acknowledges Grant, referring to work done with victims of post-traumatic stress and other related illnesses. "Some techniques were just too simplistic and reductive," he says, citing neuro-linguistic programming as a method he believes has had its day.

"There is so much more research to draw on nowadays in this field. This year alone there have been 312 articles in the peer review press whereas there were only 100 the year before. There are specialist journals full of discussion and empirical studies. I think departments like mine are about bringing rigor and critical thinking to coaching."

Dr Grant's main focus of interest is in looking at organisational issues of stress in the workplace, staff retention, personal motivation and leadership.

"It is still the case that most organisations work in a rule based mechanistic way which is over-

engineered. A university is a perfect example of this. I think the modern workplace needs more autonomy. Centralised control stifles creativity. Coaching can lubricate parts of the machine,” he says, though he’s not presumptuous enough to apply this remedy to his own institution.

“I adhere to the mantra of the 12 step program as used by Alcoholics Anonymous: ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change’,” he says, a cheeky laugh punctuating his persistent south London accent. But he adds, on a more serious note: “That saying has applications in this field: we look at the positive acceptance of powerlessness and personal vulnerability which can lead to a personal wake-up call that brings about change. It’s about learning how letting go of control can mean you gain control. The Dalai Lama is very good at recognising what we call ‘choice points’ in terms of what you can change and letting go of the outcome. We are wrong to see acceptance as weakness, but that is a very western notion.”

He thinks the much talked about dilemma of so-called work/life balance is over-stated.

“If your work is your calling, you make no distinction between it and the rest of your life. It’s not an either/or dichotomy,” says the father of two boys who says that his idea of relaxation is “writing papers – seriously – as well as playing loud, rather bad blues guitar and camping or skiing with the family.” (Grant’s wife, Georgie, is a social worker).

Grant does not think some jobs are inherently better than others.

“I’ve worked digging graves and emptying bins and my experience is that the people doing those jobs are happier than some of the lawyers I work with.”

Asked to nominate the people who inspire him in his field, he gives a typically idiosyncratic answer.

“Gurdjieff for his integrative thinking and early use of mindfulness in everyday life, Ken Sheldon for his book *Optimal Human Being* and finally Keith Richards, because if anyone personifies resilience in their personal and professional life, it’s him!”

Not that Anthony Grant would necessarily encourage students or clients to adopt such an extreme lifestyle. On second thoughts, maybe he would. **SAM**

The modern workplace needs more autonomy. Centralised control stifles creativity.

Photo by Karl Schwerdtfeger

